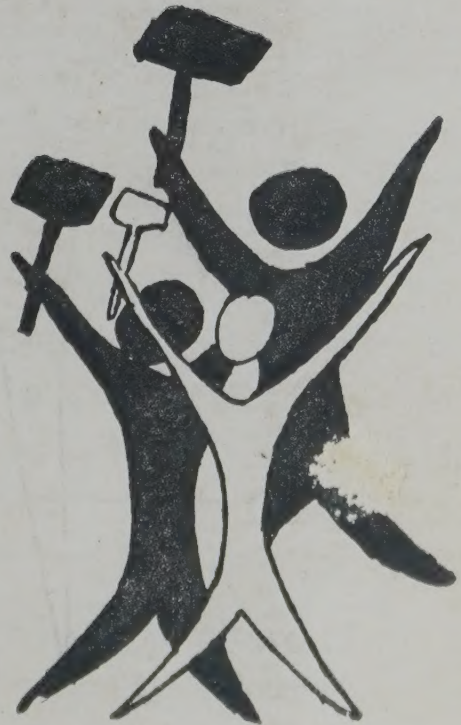


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Vigil Series - 4

Vigilant Women



VIGIL INDIA MOVEMENT

AWAKING IN KANYA KUMARI

Every year thousands of tourists flock to the town of Kanya Kumari in the State of Tamil Nadu which lies at the Southern most tip of the Indian peninsula. It is at this point that the waters of the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea mingle. Flanked by the Western ghats to the East and its long coastline washed by the Arabian Sea forming its western border, Kanya Kumari District is one of the most picturesque places in India. Those people who are dependent on the sea for their livelihood have naturally found Kanya Kumari's sea coast to their advantage and the fishermen's villages all along the coastal region are many centuries old. Kanya Kumari District has a population of over 12 lakhs.

The Eighty three village Women's Vigil Groups with their three thousand literate and illiterate members distributed in the various parts of Kanya Kumari District stand together in their struggles. They know they are part of a wider national fellowship of rural and urban men and women committed to tireless and fearless struggle in the building up of a new society. It is hard, it is slow. But these many small acts of love and courage help to lay the much needed strong foundation for a just society.

The struggle of these young women goes on. They are a determined lot. Their strength comes mainly from their togetherness.

(continued on 3rd cover)

A NOTE

Talk of Human Rights or Democracy is meaningful only in a context where exploitation of man by man has been put an end to.

India's villages present a picture of extreme poverty and misery where human dignity is violated in every imaginable way. Any attempt to create a new social order in which Human Rights and Democracy are meaningful, therefore, is an arduous task which calls for a long and determined struggle against all forms of exploitation. At every step in the struggle human dignity and freedom have to be asserted. Civil and democratic rights are not violated in the abstract. They are violated in actual situations every day in villages, offices, hospitals and schools. Therefore, those who stand for the basic freedom of man will have to fight against exploitation at all these levels.

In the pages that follow short accounts of some real struggles waged by a group of courageous young women against the powers that be to uphold the basic dignity of human being and for a just social order are given. These women, young and poor, with only some school education, were exposed to the broad realities of Indian Society through intensive courses conducted by the Vigil India Movement. The course was given in their mother tongue-Tamil-and consisted of talks, role plays, discussions, field trips, filmshows, etc. Equipped with a better understanding of their social situation than they had before and with a determination to effect some small change, at least in their lives and situations, these women returned to their villages and small towns in Kanya Kumari District of Tamil Nadu. By now they have matured with experience. They have learnt to meet resistance of all sorts

particular resistance from vested interests and from those opposed to change. It is a curious fact that sometimes even those who are the subjects of ill-treatment and exploitation and for whom they were working acted in a way that was discouraging. These brave women have taken all this in their stride and the results they have achieved are both rewarding and instructive. It can be said for them as individuals and as a group that they have been able to effect some changes, however small, in their own surroundings while more importantly, they have also grown in their understanding and knowledge of their strength to resist. It is on these that the promise of the future rests.

PART I

Let them be free

It is perhaps just as well that in Knaya Kumari, the region under focus for Vigil work, it is the women who have taken the lead and are waking others to their rights and duties and fighting for them. It is well because women make the home and if a light is to be lit, it should first be lit inside the home. It is well because women are the mothers of the citizens to come and it is well above all because they have been and still are the most oppressed section of our people. If a more just and better order can be brought about through a process of education and determined assertion of rights, that education should begin with the women.

One for Women's Emancipation

Lyla is a muslim housewife in Kolachel. She is the wife of a lorry diver and has three children. She attended a 15 day Vigil Course and has involved herself in considerable work organising the women in her area. Lyla believes in the economic freedom of women and she is doing her bit helping them towards it by running classes for them and persuading them to take up jobs in the cashew factories as a means of becoming economically independent. She has also helped the cashew-nut factory workers in their agitation for increase in wages.

To her and the Vigil Group she works with must go the credit of bringing a domestic dispute to a successful conclusion. In this case the husband wanted a divorce. According to traditional muslim practice he was entitled to it. Lyla and some of her Vigil Group workers talked to both the partners and brought about a reconciliation which is in the interests of the children. This family is now happy.

Lyla's general work is in the direction of leading the struggle for the emancipation of women especially the muslim women in her area. Her achievements go to prove that married women while doing justice to their duties as mothers and wives can also carry on the fight against injustice in our society.

No Budget No Saving

Amal Mary is the Convener of the Vigil Group in her locality in a village in which the members of the fishing community have not learnt to save money. During some seasons when the catch is good, they earn large sums of money all of which they squander away in a short period. They are given to celebrating marriages and religious festivals and borrow heavily from the money-lenders.

The money-lenders not only charge a high rate of interest but also make the loan conditional to their selling the entire catch to them. This exploitation had become an established

practice because the fisherfolk did not know how to regulate their expenditure and save. Amal Mary organized a Vigil Group for the fisherwomen. She talked to the women and they were made aware of the importance of planning their budgets and savings for the future. With the help of Amal Mary and her friends 58 fisherwomen from this village started savings accounts in the bank. In addition serious and concerted efforts are being made by the Group to prevent the villagers from falling into the clutches of the deadly moneylender.

Adding to the Family Fund

Thusnevias of Pettakuzhi has been engaged in active work in her locality. She organised the women in her village and conducted classes for them on Human Rights. Having herself undergone training in poultry farming at the YMCA, she has instructed the village women in keeping poultry. She introduced to them the idea of supplementing the family income. In her village now 18 women have small poultry farms making a good addition to the regular family income.

Help Change Attitude

Elizabeth is an active Vigil worker among fisherwomen. She belongs to Kovalam, a small coastal village close to Kanya Kumari town which as far as anyone can recall has been sustained by fishing. Here is an industrious community with a high level of skill which has needed more organization, and a change of its ideas. Elizabeth and the Vigil Group have helped here. As a fishing people the women too in these villages have come to occupy a unique and important place in their socio-economic structure. Starting with merely helping their men in their work, they have gradually come to play a vital role in selling the fish. This may be seen in their work all along the coastal area of Kanya Kumari. Over the years too, they have gained expertize and are often better than their men in handling customers. By drying fish and weaving nets in their leisure hours they also make an additional contribution to the family income.

The greater involvement of the women in the family business has not been an unmixed blessing. With the women away from home selling fish in the market, the children have tended to suffer from neglect and there is no arrangement to help here. This, combined with a total lack of medical facilities in these villages, has caused a high rate of mortality. However genuine these grievances, they have gone unrepresented to the local authorities and the government because there is no organization to represent them. When faced with serious problems (such as trawlers playing havoc) the community resorts to an adhoc strike. That is as organised as they have got. More important is the fact that so far they seemed to accept their lot. With the Vigil Group getting started there is now a welcome change in the attitude of these people. There is a new awakening, especially among the women. They are revising their traditional notions about the education of children, health and family size.

PART II

To be free you must know

A system's political strength is the awareness of the people who live under it. You must know your rights and the rights of others and insist on a fair deal for everyone. In a country where caste and creed and other outside factors make one's rights and duties difficult to perceive, it is as necessary to be alert and clear-sighted as to endeavour to create such clarity among others. The Vigil India Movement as may be seen in all the examples and especially those given in this group rests for its strength and continuance on people who can do this.

A play to Catch the Conscience

Theresammal comes from Kuzhithottam where she worked along with the other village women in a cashew-nut factory. Her village is known for the wide gulf that exists between the higher and lower castes. Under the leadership of Theresammal the Vigil Group of this village did what they could to bridge the social distance that separates the community. They began with talks. But these proved ineffectual. They then resorted to drama. Vigil workers enacted a play in which the Brahmins were shown humiliating and exploiting the Nadars in the past. This theme was intended to bring indirect focus on the existing situation in which the Nadars were illtreating the Harijans. The play was staged at a village school. A large crowd gathered. As the play progressed glimpses of the life of slavery the ancestors of the present Nadars suffered under the Brahmins were sketched. This shameful reminder emphasized the need for a change in their attitude towards the Harijans. A speech at the end of the drama by a Vigil Group Convener further drove the point home. Theresammal stressed the need for unity among all people regardless of caste differences and requested that the practice of making Harijans draw water for others be brought to an end. Evidence that her request was complied with was seen the very next day.

A Little Initiative Goes a Long Way

Saraswathi comes from the village of Erumpookadu. She participated in a 15 day Vigil Course. Making mats is a cottage industry for women in her village. The government introduced a scheme of providing financial assistance to women engaged in this trade. When Saraswathi learnt of this she took the initiative in obtaining application forms and distributed them to 12 women. A loan of Rs. 90/- was given to each of them. These women are thus able to supplement the income of their families.

Not Enough to be Qualified

Jaya Leela a Vigil worker, is aware of her role in society. When the government announced its scheme for adult educa-

tion, she applied for the post of a teacher. Even though she was qualified for the post she was not selected ; the vacancies went to candidates who commanded influence. She took up her case to the District Educational Officer. The reception she got there was more than cold ; whenever she went to the office of the Educational Officer, she was told that he was busy. She had already visited twice. The third time she spent the whole day at the Education Office and refused to leave until he promised her an appointment on the following day. The next day she gave him her application. 'Come and see me after two weeks' he said. 'I will come after one week' she replied. He then realized that there was no point in arguing with this determined lady. 'Yes, after one week,' he said. But it was not settled then. It took many more visits and long arguments before she was finally selected as an Adult Education Class Teacher. Now she conducts 5 hour classes on a weekly basis for 30 women in the village. She has received her salary only for the first month. Along with her colleagues in the Adult Education Programme she now plans to fight for a regular allowance.

PART III

Fighting injustice

In many countries including our own, democracy fails not for lack of faith but for lack of vigilance and the will to act. If corruption exists it is also because it is tolerated and condoned in most cases. If a wrong is done or continues to be practised it is also because the effort and courage to oppose it are wanting among those who suffer it.

Keeping them in Line

Lalitha Kumari is a Balwadi teacher in Kuzhithurai. Among the many instances she narrates in which women in her village have to fight for justice is one where she paid a visit to a government hospital and heard complaints regarding the distribution of medicines. Drugs were being supplied on the basis of recommendations and bribes. On hearing the resulting suffering to patients she decided to pay a visit to the District Medical Officer. The District Medical Officer promised to look into the matter.

A few days later she launched a signature campaign and sent the memorandum to the concerned authority. Lalitha Kumari is among the few who are aware of their rights. She believes in people's power. She hopes that with continued vigilance, corruption which is so widespread can be wiped out.

Waking Up the Watchman

Sushila is an adult education programme teacher at Panchalingapuram. But she did not get these without a struggle. Although a qualified teacher she was astonished to see that her name was not included in the first list of candidates for selection. She and her friends saw the Education Officer and pointed out that while other candidates who were less qualified had been listed, Sushila's name had been omitted. The officer was reluctant to look into the matter. He excused himself saying that it was already very late. The girls replied that they had waited a long time and had forgone their meals to see him. They felt it was a case of inefficiency which could permanently spoil Sushila's chances. They warned that if the matter was not taken up immediately they would stage a 'dharna' the whole night. The girls were determined for it was a fight for justice. The officer did not want more trouble. He ordered the lists to be rechecked. With his colleagues working overtime, two hours later he got the lists ready with all such errors rectified. In the cause of justice everyone needs to be alert.

A Doctor in Need !

Babylet is an active Vigil worker from Mullenkanavillai. In an incident which involved her and a friend she showed that she could stand her ground and resist corruption. It happened one day that she and her friend had gone to a nearby government hospital for a medical certificate. Unusually there was no crowd outside the consulting room. The office assistant asked them what they had come for and when they told him that they needed a medical certificate he asked them if they had brought the fee. This annoyed them. In this hospital bribes were demanded for every job. They said they had brought it and joined the queue. When their turn came, they went in and the lady doctor immediately asked them for the fee. They said they did not know what the fee was for; this was the first time they had heard of a government doctor demanding a fee for a medical certificate. The doctor was furious and said, 'I had to spend a lot of money to get my education as a doctor. You people are going to benefit from the certificate I give you. Why can't you pay me something for my service?' To this one of the girls replied that the Government spent a great deal of money on a doctor's education—money that had been really collected from the people through taxes. She concluded, 'So it is your duty to serve us.' On receiving this reprimand the doctor wanted to get rid of the girls. She gave a certificate and said, 'Why are young girls like you wandering about? Why don't you get married and settle down!' To which the girls replied that they were quite capable of looking after their personal problems but she had better learn her duties as a doctor !

Fight for it is Your Right

Presiding and Polling Officers in charge of polling booths are considered as the people who can discharge their duties with justice and impartiality no matter what their own political affiliations and interests are. But some of them find the position an easy way of making large sums of money working as agents of a candidate of a political party. In the recent Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections a polling officer tried her best to

canvas for a particular candidate. A young Harijan girl Pushpa Latha, aged 22, who is an active Vigil worker reported this malpractice to the authorities. This girl and her friends heard the polling officer making a whispering request to give their vote to a certain candidate. Thereupon Pushpa Latha told her, 'It is our right to decide whom we wish to vote for.' After marking her ballot paper she wanted to put the paper into the box. However, it did not go in completely. When she moved away the officer removed it and tampered with the ballot paper. On glancing back, this girl observed the act. She immediately questioned the Officer on her conduct. The Officer replied, 'Who are you to question me? Get out, otherwise I know how to send you back.'

On going out the girl lodged a complaint with the policeman who was on duty at the polling booth. He told her to ignore it. But Pushpa Latha was determined to fight against the corrupt practice. She narrated the incident to her villagers standing outside the booth who were ready to join her in the struggle for justice. They took a taxi to the Monday Market, in the adjoining town, and telephoned the Collector from there. He was quick to act. He rushed to the scene and was able to obtain firsthand evidence from the people who had already exercised their franchise. He immediately ordered an enquiry into the matter. The guilty Officer was suspended from the duties. To pacify the enraged crowd of villagers the Officer was removed from the scene in a police Jeep. The Block Development Officer was also present there. He congratulated the Harijan girl and presented her with a pen. He asked her to continue her fight against this kind of injustice more vigorously.

The Right to Your House

Janaki is a girl from the Nadar community who attended a 90day Vigil Course. Her father is a wood-cutter. She herself is a tailor. She has helped 17 girls to acquire sewing machines of their own with available bank loans. But she was suddenly faced with a different kind of problem in her village.

In the village she lives in Harijans have their huts on a piece of land adjoining the landlord's personal property. When the landlord decided to install handpumps to irrigate the

land around, he wanted the huts of the Harijans demolished. This he said would give his land direct connection with the water pumps. Alternatives offering the same facilities were suggested but he was adamant and refused to listen to the pleadings of the Harijans to let their huts stay.

When Janaki learnt of the landlord's plans she organized the Harijans and drafted a memorandum to the government authorities requesting them to intervene. She also took some of the Harijans with her and met the Harijan Welfare Officer and represented their grievance to him. When she got back from there she found the landlord making preparations for the demolition of the huts. She urged the Harijans to raise a strong protest and herself hurried back to the Welfare Officer. He came at once so that he could judge for himself what the situation was like and decided on legal action against the landlord. The landlord on his part was shocked to find that the authorities were not in his favour. To the villagers too the incident was an eye-opener for they had never known that they had rights which could protect them from the landlord. They realized too that the law was there for everyone and if they united and approached the authorities justice could be theirs.

This Nadar girl has another episode to relate. This episode may well stand as an example of the benefit that can be derived from the joint efforts of the community and the government. In the same village where the incidents of the huts took place, the poorer sections of the people did not have the facilities of tap water. Along with other Vigil workers, Janaki brought this to the attention of the Panchayat. The Panchayat pleaded its inability to supply water for lack of funds. It was however suggested that if the villagers could meet half the cost of installation, the other half the Panchayat would put in. Janaki and the Vigil workers came back and informed the villagers of the possibility of a water pipe connection if they contributed generously to meet part of the expense. The villagers responded with fervor. The money was collected and the Panchayat Officer kept his promise. In the space of a few weeks tap water was available to the poorer sections too.

PART IV

Battle for better living

The Vigil worker does not run after a grand dream. She has no use for big words and complex dialectics. Often she has little or no education. She is only a hardworking woman such as may be seen in any of our villages with just this difference that she has now come to see that she has many rights that are being denied her and for which she must fight. She knows also that even her basic needs like a just wage and house to live in will be denied her by the unscrupulous elements in the society if she does not organize herself and make a determined demand. She has learnt too that the value of what she produces is several times more than what she receives as payment. She has been exploited for time beyond memory. Now that she knows it, she is rightfully beginning to insist on a proper wage and other amenities.

Fight for a Better Wage

The cashew-nut factory workers in Kanya Kumari, especially the women, are an exploited group. Girls between the age of nine and fifteen are employed in violation of the Factory Act. A girl who is engaged in shelling cashew-nuts in a factory in Kanya Kumari is paid 50 paise per kilogram of kernel. The fastest worker can shell about 7 Kg and make Rs 3.50 a day. The weighers usually underweigh and reduce the wages. In Kerala according to the 1978 wage rate a woman worker's minimum wage is Rs 7. 40 per day. In addition the workers are provided with gloves, oil and chalk powder. The Kanya Kumari workers do not know their rights. Working with bare hands they run the risk of damaging their hands and feet. They crack the nuts using sticks and the acrid oil splashes on their hand and feet damaging the skin. The workers also have to get the kernel out whole. If it breaks into pieces not only are they fined but also subjected to abuse. These workers who had been content with their lot until recently are slowly becoming conscious of their rights.

Pushpa Rathi and other active members of the Vigil India Movement who happened to be workers in the cashew-nut factories are participating in the cashew-nut workers agitation. They took part in peaceful agitations organized with the co-operation of other unions. It was a novel experience for these women to participate in demonstrations. They also joined the workers in a hunger strike. They played their part in the sathyagraha programme building tents around factories, and sitting there throughout the night. They held rallies and public meetings. The management have not been able to ignore their strength and have agreed to enhance their wages. However, the women believe that many of their problems are yet to be solved. They are of the opinion that the health of the workers is also neglected and needs attention. Health workers are supposed to pay visits and report to the authorities on sanitary facilities in the factories. This has been neglected till now.

Advantages of Organized Work

Shantammal belongs to a weaver family residing in a weavers' street in Amsy. She is deeply involved in the

problems of her fellow villagers. Her family, like many others, depends solely on income from weaving cloth. A crisis arose in the village when there was a shortage of yarn which is supplied by outside agencies. As a result of big companies competing for it, the supply of yarn to the village came down. As a consequence the income of several families dwindled, but there was little they could do as the villagers constituted an unorganized sector.

Shanthammal realized the crucial need for a weavers' union to safeguard the interests of the community. She organized a Vigil Group of women weavers from her locality irrespective of caste and creed. About this time the Khadi Board of the village also announced a scheme for the benefit of the weavers. The Board proposed to supply yarn to the weavers if they would make khadi cloth which the Board would buy. On behalf of Vigil India Movement Shanthammal approached the Khadi Board and was able to obtain sanction for yarn for 63 women in her group.

More Money for Lace

Elizabeth is one of the few women who have had the privilege of completing their college education. She is an exception to the average educated village girl who finds it difficult to identify herself with the villagers. She had the opportunity to attend a 15 day Vigil Course. She organized the women involved in lacemaking to fight for better wages. In this cottage industry the prices are fixed by the middlemen who offer the paltry sum of Rs 5/- as weekly wage to the worker while collecting the maximum they can get from its sale. The fight continues.

Employer Yields

Amirthabai of Padanthalumoodu is a Nursery School Teacher. She is working as an honorary teacher in her village school. To have the school registered she had to pawn her ornaments and borrow money. The women of the locality she lives in are employed as menial workers. Tapioca is the major crop in this region. The women engaged in the tapioca cultivated land were poorly paid. No midday meal was provided. Amirthabai organized these women to fight

for better wages. When they approached their landlord with their demands, they were rudely refused. The workers then stopped all work and the employer was forced to yield to some of their demands. A midday meal and increase in wages have thus been secured.

A Wage and A House

P Pushpa Latha comes from the village Parackavilai. She is a Harijan girl who has participated in a 90 day Vigil Course. She works in the paddy fields of her landlord. The wages that women receive on this job as compared with those paid to the men are discriminatory. On an average a woman earns a rupee and one meal a day working from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. With her friend, Leela, Pushpa Latha organized 30 women workers and made them aware of their right to better wages and the need to fight for them. As a first step they decided to meet the landlord and apprise him of their demands. This in itself was an extraordinary step since Harijan women were normally known not to have the privilege of direct dialogue with the landlord. "Why have these people come?" the wife of the landlord asked. "We have come to meet your husband," the leader of the team, Pushpa Latha, replied. On the first day the landlord refused to meet them. However, they persisted in their demand to see him. On the third day he granted them an interview. When he heard their request he was furious that they had dared question his authority and demand more wages. He threatened to terminate their services and to recruit new hands for the same wages. These girls stood their ground and countered that they would make sure that nobody worked in his paddy fields for the same wages.

They then struck work for a week during which the landlord tried all he could to get other workers. The striking girls gheraoed the new hands and made it impossible for work to proceed. In despair the landlord requested them to return to work. He promised to reconsider their demands after they resumed work. The girls however were adamant, they wanted it settled before they joined. He then agreed to give them Rs 4/-a day with working hours shortened to 7 hrs. According to the government wage rate they are eligible to receive

Rs 6.00 per day. Pushpa Latha feels that they ought to take up this issue in the future.

Many of the villagers in Parackavilai are not aware of the fact that the Harijans are eligible to free house sites. The Tamil Nadu Government has a scheme of granting plots to Harijans. Pushpa Latha made the Harijans aware of their rights to avail themselves of government aid. She organized a signature campaign for a Harijan colony in the locality. Pushpa Latha met the Harijan Welfare Officer who asked her to bring the details of the government land available in her village. In her village the landlords were in illegal possession of government land. Pushpa Latha made four visits to the Tahsildar's Office and each time she was told that they were busy. They claimed that a technical problem prevented them from giving her any details as she was not the landlord. She answered that since the land belonged to the government she as a citizen had the right to be given any details she wanted. Despite all her pleadings she failed to get the required details from the Revenue Office. Her experience led her to conclude that the Tahsildar's Office was a stooge of landlords. She narrated all her bitter experiences to the Harijan Welfare Officer, whereupon he took the details of the land. The Officer personally paid a visit to her locality and heard all the grievances of the villagers. He prepared a housing scheme for the villagers. The 'Pattas' for the Harijans were distributed. He asked the villagers to arrange for a gathering. At this gathering Bank representatives, Block Development Officer and the Harijan Welfare Officer addressed them and made the villagers aware of the new schemes which the government was implementing through the various government departments. This meeting helped the Harijans become aware of the availability of Bank Loans for building houses.

Pushpa Latha and some others helped the villagers to get the necessary forms for the Bank Loans. She helped them to go through the formalities needed in this matter. By making a joint effort and using the pattas as guarantee, 17 Harijans could each get Rs. 5000/- loan for the building of their houses. Pushpa Latha is one among those who benefitted by the scheme. She is now confident enough to fight further.

PART V

Get your job done

Anyone who goes by a government's declarations on paper will agree that it exists for the good of all. Anyone who sees it work will also readily agree that its pledges notwithstanding, it serves only those who have the power. Often too it is indifferent and inefficient. And it is so because very few people take the trouble of forcing it to keep its word. In particular in a system which depends on the will of the people for decision to act, things stay undone, promises remain unfulfilled unless the people want them done and get them done. It need not be big things ; it can be small things like getting water or toilet facilities for the village, building a new bridge or getting a government cooperative society to do its work.

Wanted A Clean Village

K Swornam comes from the fishermen community. In her village Melmidalam there were no sanitary facilities. The villagers have lived in very unhygienic conditions. Along with other Vigil workers she decided to pay visits to the fisherwomen's houses and build an awareness for the need for hygiene. Alongside she fought with the Panchayats for toilet facilities for the villagers. As a result of her efforts and the pressure of the growing awareness among the people in her village 30 families have been provided toilet facilities.

As part of her work she has also trained 34 village women in basket-making and inculcated in the village women the need for planning a budget and having medical services in the village.

Water for You and Me

Saradha of Panankalavilai is an educated girl. The Vigil Group in her village consists of women labourers. Water for household purposes has to be drawn and carried a distance of two kilometres. Saradha approached the concerned authorities and managed to get a new well sanctioned. This well, an example of people's common effort, was built with the joint efforts of the village people.

Build A New Bridge

Catherin Stella Bell is undergoing a six-month handicraft training course sponsored by the Palmyra Co-operative Society. In her village there is an old bridge across a stream. During the monsoon it was common for two or more persons to drown due to the dilapidated condition of the bridge. Yet this bridge was being used both by women and children who collected 'akkani'. The Vigil Group of Stella Bell's locality took up this issue. They approached the Panchayat authorities but soon realized that the authorities were not really concerned about their grievances. The Group then prepared a mass petition and collected signatures from the villagers and met the BDO, the PWD Engineer and the Collector. At this time a dead body was found in the stream. The Group requested the Police

Inspector and the Collector to visit the locality. The Collector made a visit along with other officials including the Police Superintendent. The villagers rallied round the Vigil Group and agitated for a proper bridge. The Collector promised to take immediate action. Within a week the PWD Engineer drew up a scheme which was sanctioned by the Collector and now the construction of the bridge is underway.

Bulldozing Bureaucrats

Jessi Janet Bai has undergone a 15 day Vigil Course. In her locality they did not have enough water for their needs. The Vigil girls wanted to make a representation to the BDO but when they tried to see him they were not allowed to meet him by an employee of the office. He asked them why they were so particular to meet the BDO. The girls told him 'when you fail to carry out your duties the only remedy is to take the grievances directly to your senior officer. If he also fails the next alternative is to meet someone higher. We want our problems solved through democratic means.' After listening to them he told them when the BDO would be available. They met him on that particular day and requested that he pay a visit to their village. As the official vehicle was not available he told them to bring a vehicle. The reply the girls made was: 'Come and visit us. We came walking. If we girls can walk to this place you too can.' The BDO was unwilling and a little annoyed by their forthright speech. They told him that they were going to sit there and not allow him to go home. After three hours of waiting the officer began to change his attitude towards the girls. He asked his colleagues to arrange for a jeep. Along with the girls he visited the place and saw the urgent need for a pipeline. He sanctioned it. A task was accomplished.

Much Effort for a Repair Job

Ranileela comes from Padakacheri. She has organized a Vigil Group in her locality. In her locality the only road they had was in a bad state: repairs were long overdue. When the Vigil Group approached the Panchayat authorities to discuss the need for repairs the authorities were astonished.

They wanted to know by what right women could pursue such a matter. One of the Officers demanded, 'Why are you coming out of your home? Where is your modesty? The girls replied, 'Look at us. We have trudged three long miles from our village. Our roads are in a poor condition. You enjoy yourselves here, while we suffer due to your negligence.'

However the Vigil Group was able to meet the Panchayat Officer only after a second attempt. He made many promises which he never adhered to. Many more visits were made to this Officer and finally the Group had the road repaired.

Mother, Milk and the Milk Society

Leela Bai is a Harijan girl from Pallampalam. This young woman in her desire to support her mother who works as a coolie, took a loan available to lower income groups and bought herself a cow costing Rs 1500/-of which Rs 600-came from the Government as a subsidy for Harijans. The loan was given on the condition that the milk should be sold only to the Milk Society. This would also enable the loan to be liquidated in instalments from the sale of the milk. The Society had a boy to collect the milk from the people who had bought cows from loans. But Leela Bai's house is far away and there is no proper road to it. In her locality only Nair families owned cows. It was considered beyond the means of Harijans. The boy agreed to call at Leela Bai's house at 5 O'clock in the morning for the milk. This meant that she had to wake up at 3 O'clock in order to have the milk ready when the boy arrived. The boy came for two days and stopped. On the third day she decided to take the milk herself to one of the houses where the boy normally called. So, accompanied by a friend she trekked the four miles to that house in the early hours of the morning. The lady of the house immensely proud of the fact that she was the only owner of cows in that locality was disdainful. On hearing Leela's complaint she told her that unless the boy was paid he would not collect the milk. The girls replied that it was his duty to collect the milk; he was an employee of the Milk Society. The woman then rudely remarked that the length of the girls' tongues would never help them to repay the loan. At this juncture the boy

arrived and told the girls that if they wanted their milk collected they should bring it there every day. The girls protested. They reminded him also that it was his duty to come and collect the milk. The boy retaliated saying that he would not undertake such a tedious task. He did not call at their house the next morning and Leela and her friend carried the bucket of milk to the Society six miles away. They also met the Secretary of the Society and made a complaint against the boy. The secretary was very sympathetic and assured them that this problem would not arise again. He called the boy and warned him. For a week the boy collected the milk regularly from Leela's house. He then invented excuses and stopped. Leela was running into loss and was in despair. She made another visit to the Secretary but this time he was far from sympathetic. Instead he argued that it was not possible for them to send the boy to that distance to collect the milk from a single family. He said she was to devise her own means of delivering the milk. She pleaded her inability but it was all in vain. She then decided to approach the President of the Society. The President was impatient and told her he had no time for such trivial matters. He argued that if there were more cows in that locality it would be possible to appoint a boy to collect the milk. The girls went back and with the help of Vigil workers began persuading other women in their locality to avail themselves of loans to buy cows. Seventeen families took loans and bought milking cows. Leela then went to the President of the Co-operative Milk Society and requested him to send a boy to their area as there were 17 families now with milking cows. The President had to agree and send a boy on regular basis.

PART VI

They need your help

Is it enough to know one's rights and fight for them? Can we be sure that by such knowledge and such struggle equality and justice will prevail? Theoretically this should happen but as long as there are the weak and the poor who need the help of others and there are those who cannot help themselves from illness of one kind or another, the goals of equality and justice will not be reached unless those who are alert, aware and strong help and protect them. Here are two cases in which Vigil members took upon themselves such a responsibility and were happy to discharge it.

Human Kindness

Bhagvatiammal of Edayanvilai is a Vigil Convener. She has undergone a 15 day training programme of Vigil India Movement. Her father is no more. Her mother, who is a coolie, finds it very difficult to make ends meet. Bhagvatiammal runs a Balwadi for the village children. She collects rice from the villagers and prepares a midday meal for the poorer children. The villagers in appreciation of her work raised the money to help her get her Balwadi registered with the government. She has great consideration for her suffering fellow beings. On one occasion she found an aged man who was mentally ill, lying at the railway station. Bhagvatiammal and her friends looked after him for 5 days. They got him admitted in a hospital. When he passed away, the Vigil girls took the responsibility of informing the authorities and disposing of the body.

Protecting A Widow's Rights

Janaki is an active Vigil worker in Poovankudyiruppu. She was able to find the means to alleviate the suffering of a Harijan woman who had no one to look after her. This woman, a widow of fortyfive with a child of twelve, had all her wealth and security in 6½ cents of land on which her house was built. Since she had no one to protect her, a wily neighbour whose land adjoins hers taking advantage of her helplessness encroached on one and half cents of her land. The widow did not know whom to turn to and what to do. No neighbour had the courage to challenge the encroachment as the man was influential. At this stage Janaki and her friends came to the widow's assistance. They have been able to get an injunction order from the Court.

CONCLUSION

These are the achievements of brave young women. Talking to them is also an experience. These Vigil girls make no big declarations. They have no manifesto. They do not thunder and they have no rhetoric. Haltingly, almost diffidently they start raising simple but very basic issues. In their own way they question the rationale of the present social arrangement, and the ethics and legitimacy of the process of development which over the decades has ignored and bypassed them and thousands like them in the villages. The realization has been slow but it has come at last that they will achieve nothing without some personal sacrifice. And for this they are prepared for they know that it is the only way for a better tomorrow.

The following are not isolated and individual incidents. The various groups confer among themselves to plan their strategies.

Every Vigil Group has over thirty members. It is a new experience in the history of the villages for the women to meet and discuss their common problems. Their men's interest is also aroused. Together they fight oppression.

The Conveners of the 83 Vigil Groups meet once every three month to study wider issues and share their achievements and failures. Again once every month Conveners in the four areas of the District meet seperately to discuss local problems and set their Agenda for action.

The Vigil Group workers are mostly unemployed or underemployed poor women. They get no remuneration for Vigil work. Vigilance has become part of their lives. Many of them have gone through intensive two week socio-political courses offered by the National Office of the Vigil India Movement. Some have gone through a three month course also. Through learning and experience these people have become the backbone of the Movement in the Kanya Kumari District.

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